

Friendship: The Essence of Vedic Marriage¹

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There are many types of *vivāha* or weddings in the Hindu tradition. For example, the wedding of Shakuntala and Dushyanta is a *gandharva-vivāha*, a marriage by mutual consent, without any wedding ceremony. Many weddings in the West fall under this category. The most common wedding in the Vedic tradition, however, is the *vaidika-vivāha*, also known as the *brahma-vivāha*.

In this kind of wedding, typically, a number of guests are invited to attend and bless the couple. If the guests are younger than the couple, they wish them well and pray for them. If they are older, even by a day, they bless them. Everyone present at the event is a witness to the wedding, including the priests, *brāhmaṇās*; *agni*, fire, and the *Ādityādi devatās*, etc. Your *hrdaya*, heart, and your mind also witness the wedding. The concept of the heart and mind being a witness, here, is a reference to one's conscience. In fact, there is no conscience other than your common sense, or knowledge of right and wrong. The 'informed you' is the conscious being, and that being is the witness. Finally, *sākṣi* or *ātmā* is also a witness to the wedding.

We perform certain specific rituals during the wedding ceremony. First, we perform a *nāndī-śrādha* to obtain the blessings of all our ancestors. Then we perform a *dāyādi homa* to get the blessings of all the *devatās*. There are many significant steps in these rituals involving the families of both the bridegroom and the bride. Their brothers and sisters are also involved in the rituals. The *māigalya-dhāraṇam* or the tying of the *maṅgala-sūtra* is an important step, but is not the final ritual. It is only a prelude for what follows. The *vaidika* wedding is complete only after the *saptapadī*, the taking of seven steps by the couple. These seven steps are symbolic and very significant. They are symbolic of two people coming together, both of whom are pilgrims. You know, a pilgrim is just not a traveler. While every traveler is not a pilgrim, every pilgrim is a traveler. Someone who goes to Hawaii is not a pilgrim, but the person who goes to Jerusalem or Varanasi is a pilgrim. A pilgrim has a very sacred destination. Thus, with every step that is taken in this *saptapadī*, there is a prayer, "May the all-pervasive Lord Vishnu, the sustainer of everything, lead us as we take this step."

Human life is very complex and you have to take the initiative to make it simple. Each one is born alone and walks alone, and is proceeding towards a certain destination. What can that destination be? Security is one destination and it is relative in the beginning. Only once you gain relative security, can you gain absolute security. For example, money, a home, progeny, etc., are all forms of relative security, which give you a sense of satisfaction. This sense of satisfaction gives you a sense of growth or maturity. For instance, you gain a certain fulfillment through your children. Everyone has an inner child that missed out on something in his or her childhood. When you become a parent, through the very process of parenting, you get back what you missed. The experience of love is the same whether you love or are loved by

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another person. When you think the other person loves you, it is only your guess; but, when you love, you are sure about your love. As a parent, you are certain about your love for your children. That is why when you bring up children, you find that you become a therapist for yourself. Hence, no therapists were needed in earlier days. When you become a mother or father, you get what you missed as a child. That is what marriage is for: to help you in self-growth. You grow in a marriage; you have no choice but to grow.

In this creation, which is continuously taking place, the man and the woman, two pilgrims, begin their lives together. Is there a destination? What can it be? Every self-conscious individual wants to be self-satisfied. When I don't need to be 'approved' by others, I am O.K.; I have made it. I have made it when I don't need others' emotional support; that is growth. It is very important. Therefore, every self-conscious being has to see himself or herself as an adequate person: self-satisfied, content, and happy. That is the destination: *mokṣa* or freedom. To reach that final destination, there is a relative destination; growth. You have to be morally upright without any conflicts. In the beginning, there may be conflicts, but afterwards, there will be moral uprightness without any conflict. It should become so natural to you that it is impossible for you to compromise your value structure. For this, you need to be emotionally secure.

To achieve this relative emotional security you need to fuse your ego, and for that, you require another person. You have to work with another person towards this emotional growth because when there is another person, one ego rubs another ego. If the rub is too rough, it is not good; if there is no roughness at all, it is not good either. This is the nature of marriage. There will be some roughness, but you will have to work with it all the same because of your commitment. You have declared in front of all these witnesses that you are going to be together for life. You yourself have declared this openly, in the presence of *agni* and all the *devatās* and, therefore, you don't have a choice. You have to work it out for yourself. For two persons to live together, it takes a certain sacrifice, a certain yielding. Nobody can sharpen a knife on a rough stone; much less, on a slab of butter! When you yield, you grow, and you become richer.

Marriage is a very significant event in one's life. It is sacred because two separate pilgrims come together to proceed forward towards the same goal. Like two rivers that come from different sources and merge in the same ocean, these two people come together in a marriage and undertake the pilgrimage together. Therefore, marriage is not an end. If it were an end, it would end! It is a means, a *sādhana*, for your growth. In as much as it is a means for your growth, there is no bad marriage at all. But, you have to make it a means. We need to grow. This growth ensures that nobody is a loser. Naturally, the couple prays to Lord Vishnu and then takes the first of the seven steps.

The first step in the *saptapadī* is for material wealth. The next step is for health and strength. The third step is toward wealth of all kinds, including inner wealth, and here the couple is asking for help in following dharma, for growth. The fourth step is toward mutual happiness and the fifth toward the welfare of the families. Then there is

a sixth step taken for prosperity in all seasons, and finally, the seventh step toward the happiness born of wisdom. After taking the seven steps, the bride and groom chant a mantra pledging lasting friendship, mutual respect, and harmony. Once your bride is in your home, she is your friend. In an Indian marriage, the man is typically older than his wife. Because of this, he is given respect in this relationship. In this friendship, however, neither is superior or inferior to the other.

In the final ritual, the *sakhyā-homa*, the bridegroom chants a mantra telling the bride that he is the *sāma* and she is the *r̥k*, meaning that he is the lyric and she is the music, and that he is the earth and she is the heavens, and so on. The *sakhyā-homa* is the last ritual in the wedding, but it is very important. Ultimately, a marriage is all about friendship and understanding. Finally, there is the *hrdaya-sparsā*, the ‘touching of hearts’, in which both declare, “I give my heart to you. May your mind work in consonance with mine.” This does not mean that both should think alike, but is an affirmation that each will support the other, support the other’s interest. The *sakhyā-homa* is a wonderful assertion of eternal friendship.

From all this you can understand that you are not a mere witness in this world. You are a participant in this creation; you create; you do; you accomplish, and you have all the *śaktis*, powers, for all this. When you participate in the creation, you are one with Īśvara and that is why the wedding is highly ritualistic. In fact, the couple is viewed as Śiva and Pārvatī, or Nārayaṇa and Lakṣmī. If you think you are Nārayaṇa or Lakṣmī, you cannot have any problems with your self-image. *Deho devālayaḥ proktah*; the body is called the abode of the gods, *devālaya*. Thus, this *jīva* is *Bhagavān*. Where, then, is the problem of self-esteem? Every day, we offer a bath, *snāna*; clothing, *vastra*; ornaments, *ābharana*; sandal paste, *chandana*; and *kumkuma* in worship to Īśvara in our hearts. Īśvara is not only in our hearts, but is everywhere and is everything. Whatever we do to ourselves is an offering to God or whatever is offered to God is, in effect, given to ourselves.

Thus, these *vivāha* mantras are very significant and very meaningful. The two separate pilgrims, who come together in this friendship pledge to support each other and use the marriage as a means for self-growth.